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Don Erler. *Lone Star State of Mind: A Former Political Theorist Explores Real World Issues.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002. xiv + 181 pp. $69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0449-1; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-0450-7.

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The News From Texas

Don Erler presumes to articulate the political thought of Texans in his collection of essays, *Lone Star State of Mind: A Former Political Theorist Explores Real World Issues.* Erler, a Dallas native, Fort Worth business owner, and columnist for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, received his undergraduate degree and two graduate degrees in multidisciplinary studies from the University of Dallas in Irving, Texas, and taught American political thought and constitutional law at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, for six years in the late 1960s to mid-1970s. His former professor, George Anastaplo, describes Erler as an "old-line Texas conservative." Taking for granted that others share his political positions has apparently been a practice of long-standing for Erler, according to Anastaplo, who writes the forward to this volume (p. ix).

Lone Star State of Mind is a collection of 104 essays that have appeared in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* between 1996 and January 2002. Erler arranges these topically with an introduction and ten chapters presented in two parts ("Political Leaders and Public Policy" and "Nature's Design and America's Republic"), which, he maintains, reflect the principle that "the parts cannot be known without reference to the whole" (p. xii). In the five chapters of part 1, he airs his views on the federal judiciary, the Catholic church, and conservative republican leaders, including Bill Clinton, to whom he devotes five of fourteen essays in the first chapter. Erler also treats drug abuse and enforcement, military policy, social security, campaign finance, capital punishment, race and gender issues, political economy, welfare reform, gun control, and abortion. He devotes articles in part 2 to his interpretation of "natural laws," morality, human nature, evolution, religion, education and family values, the first amendment, and the Supreme Court.

Erler, a self-described cradle conservative and capitalist (p. 159), asserts that "the most reliable guide to truth detection is good old-fashioned common sense" (p. xiii). Although he never specifically defines what he means by "conservative" and "liberal," he clearly believes that conservatives exercise common sense and liberals do not–or at least, when they do, they are having a conservative moment. By his own admission, his professed conservatism is a mixture of liberal and conservative ideas. He does give clues to his understanding of the term "conservatism" in his essay on the origins of Barry Goldwater's views, attributing their philosophical roots to Socrates and Aristotle. In his credo, a liberal is anyone who is not a conservative. He believes Bill Clinton was often "right in both senses of the word," hence his 1998 essay titled "Clinton: A Good Republican President" (p. 3). Among those things he favors are decriminalization of the sale and possession of illegal drugs, the Strategic Defense Initiative, full disclosure in campaign finance, capital punishment, criminal profiling, and the Bush tax cuts. He opposes affirmative action, bi-lingual education, abortion, and government subsidized health care. He believes poverty is "the result of bad breaks and worse choices" (p. 79), and the right to success is accompanied by the right to starve (p. 91).

Despite his characterization of himself as a "conservative," Erler's collected essays are less the articulation of a coherent political philosophy than simply reactions to the headlines of the day. Thus, readers encounter what may seem to be contradictions or inconsistencies in his viewpoints. For example, he regards Clinton as "enormously bright" and "undeserving of removal from office" (p. 3) in one essay, and deserving of removal from office

in another (p. 10). He acidly criticizes moral relativism, yet a Roman Catholic himself, he turns to the Old Testament for support of some of his arguments. He favors the privatization of Social Security and health care, but concedes that government is necessary to insure the blessings of liberty. He argues against gun control and for the Brady Bill. He fervently endorses strict construction of the Constitution, at times quoting Alexander Hamilton for support. In one of his more fascinating paradoxes, he advocates government censorship to protect the public against exposure to violence and obscenity, because modern American culture cannot curtail its own vices (p. 150), yet he asserts elsewhere that the American people are better fit to interpret the Constitution through their elected legislative assembly than the Supreme Court (p. 162). In fact, throughout the collection of essays, Erler directs his ire most consistently at the Supreme Court, the federal judiciary in general, and un-elected judges in particular. The principle of judicial review he regards as especially onerous, unconstitutional, and contrary to the intent of the framers, and he obviously feels strongly that Congress should outlaw such arrogance (p. 162). "Like Jefferson and Adams," he writes in 1997, "I prefer to place my trust in God and our elected public servants" (p. 163).

Such statements provide examples of the book's *raison d'etre*. They are intended to be provocative. In the epilogue Erler acknowledges that the essays were written at specific times for changing circumstances and expresses the expectation that they "have provoked, entertained, and instructed readers" (p. 179). In matters of particularly strong conviction, he often states opinion as if it were fact: America's "greatest" president was Abraham Lincoln, William F. Buckley is "the most" influential American since 1950, Henry Jaffa is "the most sophisticated" conservative intellectual of the last forty years, and George Anastaplo is "the wisest legal philosopher" of our time. At times the logic of his "logical conclusions" (p. 179) is obscure, as in his description of George W. Bush as an intellectual (pp. 19-20, 126). Nevertheless, Erler's book fulfills the intention he expresses. Conservatives who share his views will find it entertaining, and, certainly, others will find it provocative. Its strength lies in Erler's intelligent articulation of his views and his observation of both the achievements and shortcomings of modern society and politics. Its greatest weakness lies in its lack of originality. It sheds no new light on the political state of mind in Texas. Both the "old-line Texas conservative" opinion and the topics addressed abound in the op-ed pages of newspapers and on dozens of radio talk shows throughout the state.

The topical arrangement of the essays gives less of a historical view than a chronological one. By virtue of its origins as a newspaper column, Erler's book contains no notes or bibliography to assist a serious reader in verifying his claims or facts. The index is of limited usefulness. It is comprised predominantly of proper names and titles. Many topics one might expect to find are not included. For example, there is an entry for *Marbury v. Madison* but no entry for "Supreme Court," "judiciary," or "judicial review," although comments on these are scattered throughout the book. Probably the book's greatest weakness lies in its temporal limitations. The headlines on which these essays are predicated are now yesterday's news.

Regardless of organization or weaknesses inherent in the op-ed genre, the book may prove useful in both humanities and social science classrooms to spark discussion and analysis of both form and substance, and to provide topics for student research, argument, and rebuttal. Despite its parochial title, many of the issues Erler explores are timeless and, as the sub-title states, "real world issues" that concern not only Texans but Americans. If, indeed, *Lone Star State of Mind* accurately reflects the political thinking of Texans, this book may be taken as a measure of the degree to which Texans represent the American state of mind.

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